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ABSTRACT

The increasing involvement of universities with school districts for inservice programs has not been as effective as it could be because the importance of communication in collaborative efforts is largely ignored. Florida's Teacher Education Centers (TEC) illustrate a smooth-running outreach staff-development program that involves the universities and school districts. Two university-appointed staff members, a TEC council representative and a university contact person, are the main channels of communication with the local TEC. The contact person should be a faculty member responsible directly to the dean of the college of education. All communication services to the school district should be channeled through the university contact person and the local TEC director. Internal communication within the university is essential in meeting the expressed needs of the teachers in the school district. Department heads and faculty members who are responsible for a presentation must have a clear idea of the school district needs. The university's dealings with the TEC should exhibit courtesy and rapid responses to requests in order to build a relationship based on trust and respect. (FG)

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FACILITATING UNIVERSITY-SCHOOL DISTRICT IN-SERVICE COLLABORATION

PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNICATION

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FACILITATING UNIVERSITY-SCHOOL DISTRICT IN-SERVICE COLLABORATION
PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNICATION

There has been tremendous growth in staff development activities over the past five years. Many educational organizations have devoted entire conferences to the theme of staff development. The number of articles related to staff development in professional journals, such as the Journal of Teacher Education, Phi Delta Kappan, ATE Journal, and Theory Into Practice, just to mention a few, also attest to the growing importance of staff development. And, during these economic hard times, staff development is crucial to retraining existing personnel to perform countless new jobs.

With the growing importance of staff development, there has been a corresponding increase in involvement of universities in local public school districts through outreach staff development activities. Such outreach programs usually involve instruction delivered by the university faculty and are tailored to meet local school personnel needs. However, in many cases this increased involvement of universities with districts has not borne the fruit that it might have. Indeed, because universities and school districts have been unaccustomed to long-range, close-working relationships, what looks like a good program on paper becomes difficult, in many cases, to put in place in the local districts. This difficulty was noted by Bill Drummond when he wrote:

> Different organizations, with differing goals, administrative arrangement, norms, customs and language, find collaboration anxiety producing, time consuming and in the short-range inefficient.[1]

A major improvement is achieved when effective methods for communication between university resources and local school district clients is established.

Actually such communication strategies determine, to a large degree, whether the relationship between a university and school district will flourish or perish. The following scenario illustrates Florida's successful experiences in university-school district communication and collaboration.

Florida's nine-year involvement in Teacher Education Centers (TEC) has welded the state's universities and school districts into a smooth-running collaborative arrangement. However local they seem, the points emphasized in this paper are applicable to most other outreach staff development programs that involve both university and school districts.

The discussion of communications in this paper will focus on two main topics: the internal communications within a formal TEC system and external communications within a flexible university-school district relationship. The principles of operation that parallel either function will, thus, become a proposal for a close in-service process.

PRINCIPLES OF UNIVERSITY-SCHOOL DISTRICT COMMUNICATION

There are many things universities must do to improve communications with school districts. First, protocol must be established, and followed, if the operation is new. Many in-service programs have failed simply because proper protocol, or a chain of communication, was not followed. Please note that this is not an endorsement for advocating a rigid bureaucracy, but rather a plea for an official channel of communication.

Under the TEC movement this problem has been solved as information concerning in-service needs flows in and out of the school district's designated directors of the TEC. The universities have established two positions: the "contact" person and the "TEC Council Representative."[2] The contact person is a faculty member directly responsible to the dean of

the College of Education. This person receives requests from the districts, matches requests to qualified faculty consultants who eventually provide the services, attends to administrative details needed to account for services, and represents the institution at meetings and to other agencies related to TEC.

The TEC council representative, on the other hand, is the university faculty member appointed to the school district TEC council, while the contact person either may or may not serve as the TEC council representative. The university, for many reasons, must exercise great care in the selection of a TEC council representative. For example, a person with a dominant personality is not suitable for group work. A TEC council--or any teacher-group planning in-service--desires input from the university at a consultative level not in an authoritarian, condescending tone. Moreover, the school districts may have initial fear of the universities' supposed desire for control of the grassroot TEC. A representative from the university with a dominant personality does little to dispel this false fear and should be subtly overlooked for this position if successful communication channels are the goals.

All communication regarding TEC workshops is channeled through both the university contact and the local district TEC director. Therefore, a communication network has been established illustrating the principle that solid communication between universities and school districts must involve designation of key persons for such critical communication posts.

The university contact person should be a regular employee of the university and possess a terminal degree. The former characteristic is necessary since the turnover rate for graduate assistants is high, making it difficult

for them to develop the continuity needed to establish trust between the two agencies. The terminal degree is desired since the university contact person has to deal, on campus, with administration and faculty whose attitudes are often formed by such credentials. Next, the university contact person should have had prior public school teaching experience. Acceptance by the school district is easier to obtain when such experience and knowledge of public schools is demonstrable. Finally, it is a given that the university contact person should possess exceptional communication and human relation skills. It is amazing how often a person with an introverted personality is placed in a position of high public contact--contrary to the principle that success of the program, to a large degree, depends on the ability of the university contact to relate to university, community, and school district personnel. According to Arthur Reed:

> The conflict which can be the most desctuctive to collaboration is interpersonal conflict.[3]

Richard Walton goes on to define interpersonal conflict as:

1. interpersonal disagreements over substantive issues, such as differences and organizational structures, policies, and practices, and
2. interpersonal antagonisms, that is, the more personal and emotional differences which arise between interdependent human beings.[4]

In addition to these personal and professional criteria, the physical location of the university TEC office and contact person are both essential to good communication. In Florida, all of the university contact people are either in the dean's office or report directly to it. This arrangement removes the offices from the conflicts and politics typically found within academic departments. This arrangement also marks an expression of the university's value of the program's prestige. Placement of the TEC office

in the dean's office serves yet another purpose: the proximity of the TEC office allows the dean's office constant access to information concerning the outreach staff development service. Therefore, trends and problems in such involvements may be perceived quickly by policy-makers with little fear of inaccurate translation through several bureaucratic levels.

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION

Internal communication is facilitated when department chairpersons are kept current on the various activities. At The University of West Florida, Pensacola, the university contact deals directly with the faculty consultant in establishing both conditions for and willingness to perform in forthcoming workshops. However, it is clearly understood that any agreement is contingent upon approval of the faculty consultant's chairperson. After the university contact and the faculty member reach tentative agreement about a forthcoming workshop, a form is sent by the TEC office to the chairperson for his/her approval. At several other universities the TEC contact works first with the chairperson who then in turn seeks out an appropriate faculty member. The point is that in both situations the department chairperson is kept informed.

Internal communication between the district's TEC, university contact, and faculty consultant, is facilitated further when the faculty consultant clearly understands what the school district desires in a specific workshop. Many highly competent consultants have failed miserably in workshops because there was no clear idea of what they were specifically to do there.

Under the Florida TEC system there are several built-in safeguards against such disasters. First, all workshops are keyed to the particular school district master plan. Therefore, there is a specific outline of the workshop

desired--spelled out in both cognitive and performance goals. Second, all TEC in-service is on a non-credit basis only, thereby removing the workshop participants from the "threat" of a grade. As a result many participants are quite vocal when needs are not being met. Finally, an evaluation is conducted after each workshop, insuring immediate feedback. Adjustments, during the course of the workshop, have also been made by university faculty who have sensed their topic was not what the participants desired.

Successful in-service can be achieved when clear understanding of a specific workshop is assured by having the school district appoint a contact person in the district. In this way, the faculty consultant has a person from whom clarification can be obtained prior to the workshop if necessary.

Internal communication can further be strengthened by such small considerations as providing each consultant a listing of other workshop consultants and direction maps to find target schools. Such foreknowledge increases congeniality by encouraging faculty members to share rides, reduces travel cost by stimulating travel in groups, and facilitates pre-workshop communication to offset possible problems or anxieties by allowing faculty members to see who else is participating. Maps reduce anxiety and provide convenience. At many institutions just beginning outreach staff development programs, faculty members may feel a bit uncomfortable with the new role. A simple item, such as a map, for example, may reduce anxiety.

External communication in Florida has been enhanced by each school district's having appointed a TEC director. As stated previously, all staff development information coming into the school or leaving it flows through the TEC director.

Meanwhile, the university strengthens external communications by careful refinement. There are many subtleties inherent between system communiques. For instance, the time a university takes to respond to a school district's specific workshop request often communicates a message. Response time, as an example, especially in the early stages of a program, may be equated to the university's value of the program. A rapid negative response is viewed more favorably by the school district than a long delayed positive response.

Both the university and the local school district communicate externally in the selection of consultants for workshops. The school district's request for a specific consultant whenever possible should funnel through the university contact or TEC director. To do otherwise implies the school district does not value or trust the university in the selection of consultants. Effective communication demands such trust which is difficult to establish if the district's requests for consultants are made arbitrarily and randomly outside the university faculty. This is not to imply, however, that the university should use only its personnel in the delivery of outreach workshops. The use of school district personnel, on a university adjunct basis, is frequently desirable and helpful. Moreover, there are specific areas of knowledge or performance where school district personnel are either more current or more knowledgeable than university theorists.

CONCLUSIONS

In closing, this discussion has highlighted some principles of successful communication that need be neither expensive nor difficult to implement. For example, when a university includes a description of its outreach-staff-development programs in its catalog, external communication is enhanced with school

districts, in effect saying, "We want all to know that what we do with you is important." This opens the door for internal communications which then will follow.

There is no doubt that staff development efforts will continue to grow and that this growth can be accelerated if universities and school districts work cooperatively toward common goals. One way to enhance this cooperation is by improving communication between the two parties through the establishment of consistent channels, the appointment of capable personnel, and the maintenance of thoughtful and recurrent message practices.

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